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The press has often been thought of as a potential partner for the common good of the Government, private industry, the military, and the other institutions of society. The author of this work feels, however, that the proper role of the press is that of a separate but equal protagonist—critical of both the institutions of our society and the youth culture that has developed beneath it.

THE ROLE OF THE PRESS

by

Mr. Neil Sheehan

Introductory remarks, subsequently edited by the author,
to a panel discussion on "Communication Media"
at the Naval War College

Panel Participants
Mr. Joseph C. Harsch
Mr. John Hightower
Mr. Everett Martin
Mr. Neil Sheehan

Before the discussion phase of this panel begins, I would like to express a few general thoughts I have about the role of the press in our society, what role the press is playing now, and what sort of role, ideally speaking, it ought to be playing. Whenever I get a chance to talk to a group of Government officials, someone usually asks me, "What's wrong with the American press?" Recognizing that Vice President Agnew has most of you upstaged these days, I am going to try to anticipate you this morning and tell you what I think is wrong with the news media in this

country. When I speak of the news media, I mean the printing press, the radio, and the television tube. However, my own area of knowledge and expertise is confined to the newspaper trade and, in the narrow sense, that is what I will talk about.

Mr. Agnew is right, by the way, there is a great deal wrong with the press in this country. But Mr. Agnew is right for the wrong reasons. If you listen to him, what is wrong with the press is that it is too critical of Government, specifically, his government. In my opinion, what is wrong with the news media in this

country is that they are not nearly critical enough of Government and the other major institutions of our society, whether this be Mr. Agnew's government or any other government that may succeed it. Never in recent decades has there been a greater need for an independent, tough-minded, critical press in the United States. Unfortunately, and with some exceptions, the trend in the news media in recent years has been toward less independence, less criticism, and less tough-mindedness.

I know that a great many of you here will not agree with me. You think that the news media have been unfair to the military. You are right. Undoubtedly the news media have been unfair to the military in many instances. But more importantly, you have been taught that the press ought to be part of the team, you have been taught to think that there ought to be a partnership between the press and the Government, between the press and the other major institutions in our society—all for the general good of the society. Let me say something a bit heretical. Partnership is bad for the press, it is bad for the Government, and it is bad for the country.

The press does not belong on anybody's team. If the press is to be of any use to itself and to the country, it must ruthlessly avoid partnership with any government, any institution, or any political party. The press must guard its independence with the utmost vigilance. The press must be a state unto itself. It must not just call itself the fourth estate, it must behave like a fourth estate. Partnership, membership on the team, does not produce news that informs, it produces cant and propaganda that confuses the mind. Why?

Well first of all, we live in the era of the corporate state. Since most of us are part of this corporate society, I think you all know what I am talking about. This country is, by and large, governed by a series of interlocking elites—the senior officials of the Armed Forces, the

Government, the business community, the universities, and so forth. While they may compete and battle among themselves for power, these men agree on certain essential attitudes and on certain rules by which the game is played. In recent years this corporate society has led toward more moral compromise, toward more widespread and pervasive hypocrisy, toward a kind of culture of the memorandum, to a crushing of individual initiative and imagination. Underneath this corporate state the subculture of youth has developed. This subculture rejects the values of the corporate society, the values of conventional success.

Unfortunately, this subculture of youth has a mindlessness of its own, a form of nonthink just as mindless as the culture of the memorandum. All you have to do is to look at the film of the Woodstock Festival or watch 500 to 600 young people dancing in the pool in front of the Lincoln Memorial on anti-Cambodia day in Washington to realize that there is a regimentation of its own in this youth culture. Here too there is a crushing of individualism and a conformity to a norm that embalms as quickly as the norm of the bureaucratic mind.

I think the press must stand aside from both culture—the corporate state and the youth subculture that has developed underneath it. The press must subject both to equally tough scrutiny and examination. And the press cannot fulfill the role if it is attached to either culture.

Now, specifically, what ought to be the relationship between the news media and the Government? I think that it ought to be a relationship of protagonists. I do not think it can or should be an antagonistic relationship in a pure sense. It may deteriorate into such a relationship at times, but people in the news media have to talk to people in Government on a daily basis. They have to communicate with each other well

enough so that the relationship cannot be permanently antagonistic. Nevertheless, it ought to be a relationship of protagonists, of two individuals who talk to each other, but who are independent of each other. Let me tell you why.

Rarely in our history has the executive branch of Government been as powerful as it is today. Never has the executive branch of Government had such power to manage the news by the way it can control the flow of information through a number of very sophisticated systems and devices which the electronic age has brought. The press has, unfortunately, allowed itself to be led by the executive branch in the direction in which Government wants to go. Vast amounts of newspaper space are devoted these days to what I call the nonevents or the noninformation. Every day many newspapers in this country run half a column or so of battle statistics from Vietnam, statistics that the people who compile them in Vietnam know are false from the moment the numbers are put down on a piece of paper. This excuse for news does not inform, it just confuses. It is not a historical record that will help anyone who looks back from the future to determine casualties and battle damage. Why? Because the statistics on how many bodies were counted, the statistics on how many structures were destroyed do not reflect reality.

If you spend any time with an infantry battalion in Vietnam, you realize that the body count is pulled out of the air by a commander who is trying to get some staff officer off the radio so that he can call in Medivac helicopters for his wounded, keep the artillery going, and get resupplied. Here is somebody wanting to know how many bodies he can count out there. What does the battalion commander say? He says, "Put me down for 50." Before you know it this offhand guess becomes a statistic, the statistic becomes reality,

and it is finally printed in the press. That day newspaper readers are told that 300 North Vietnamese were killed in Vietnam—sheer fantasy, of course, but the kind of noninformation that Government produces to fill space in newspapers. The only person who is misled is the average reader.

Then you have these nonevents like the Presidential trip, the press conference, and the official background, all of which are very carefully arranged ahead of time, as those of you within Government know. The press is not given a background talk by some official who just sits down and tells the press what he thinks. What he will say is massaged beforehand; internal memorandums are written about it. Government decides what the press is going to be told, who is going to do the telling, and when it is going to be told for maximum effect on the public, to the point where the whole process has now become a little absurd.

For instance, the background briefer at the White House these days, as everyone in Washington knows, is Dr. Henry Kissinger. Dr. Kissinger regularly gives backgrounders that are carefully prepared in advance. The transcripts of Dr. Kissinger's backgrounders are even neatly mimeographed and distributed to the press afterwards. But the newspaper reader is told only that "a high White House official" said something. Under this system recently, the Government was able to conduct a form of public diplomacy when Dr. Kissinger, as an anonymous White House official, attacked the Soviet Union for allegedly building a submarine base in Cuba. My mother did not know who this "high White House official" was. She might have thought it was someone, perhaps, who was being talked to in a White House corridor.

What I am saying is that Government learned long ago what the rules of the press are, how the press functions, and how you take advantage of it. Govern-

ment is using the press, and one reason the press is playing along with the game is because the press is still basically working with the tools of the police beat reporter in Chicago in the 1920's. You get a pad and pencil, scribble a few notes, run back to a typewriter, hammer out a story, and hand it in under a deadline. It goes into print. The next day you go on to another story. Once you learn how the cycle operates, if you are sitting on the other side, then you can take advantage of the cycle. Government has done this, I think, very, very well. The end result is that the press has, to a large extent, given up its role as an independent critic and an independent force within the society. To a large extent the press is losing the usefulness it once had. I know that a great many editors would not agree with me; they would say that the kind of reporting I am proposing by implication would not be objective reporting.

Well, gentlemen, there is no such thing as objectivity. The mere arrangement of facts in a newspaper story reflects bias. Truly objective reporting simply does not exist. The working definition of objectivity in the newspaper business is what some Government official or some public figure has said, even though his remarks may be completely fallacious. This attitude leads to the game of semantics at which Government has become so adept. During the recent controversy over whether the United States was conducting close-air support bombing in Cambodia, the newspapers were running

stories about how our planes were bombing "developing supply lines" in Cambodia. I called the spokesman at the Pentagon one day and asked him, "What is a developing supply line; please tell me."

"That is a supply route we think they are going to use, but they have not started to use yet," he said. This is the sort of thing you read in the newspapers today. A journalist ought to be fair, he should try to exercise good judgment and to inform rather than to preach. He should not, however, act as an echo chamber for some Government official or politician. The journalist should make judgments about the meaning of the information he has acquired, and he should be permitted to communicate those judgments honestly and openly to the reader.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Mr. Neil Sheehan is a distinguished journalist and reporter with the Washington Bureau of *The New York Times*. He graduated from Harvard University in 1958 and served for several years thereafter with the United Press International in the Far East. In 1964 he joined *The New York Times* as a reporter, was subsequently assigned as Department of Defense correspondent in 1966 and White House correspondent in 1968. In 1969 Mr. Sheehan assumed his present position as reporter on national security affairs with the Washington Bureau of *The New York Times*.

Ψ

It is the merit of a general
To impart good news, and to conceal the bad.

Sophocles, 496-406 B.C.